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SOVIET OPTIONS FOR WAR IN EUROPE: NUCLEAR OR CONVENTIONAL, (U)

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not normally  
initiate war  
unless they  
believe they  
can win.”

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**Soviet Options for  
War in Europe:  
Nuclear or  
Conventional?**

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(6) **SOVIET OPTIONS FOR WAR IN EUROPE:  
NUCLEAR OR CONVENTIONAL,**

by

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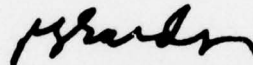
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## FOREWORD

Many analyses of Allied strategy for the defense of Central Europe against a Warsaw Pact attack assume that the Soviets would launch a conventional attack. The author of this monograph, a Soviet specialist and former Army attache in Moscow, questions this assumption.

Colonel Vernon first examines factors that suggest a conventional attack, and then looks at the considerations that would seem to favor Soviet first use of nuclear weapons. From a review of Soviet literature, to include doctrinal statements, as well as force posture and other indicators, he reaches the conclusion that, for the Soviets, "use of nuclear weapons from the start of a war in Central Europe is the most likely of several unattractive options."

The student of Soviet affairs should not overlook the Endnotes section of this monograph. The author has included considerable documentation from Soviet publications covering the issue of nuclear versus conventional warfare in Europe.



**R. G. GARD, JR.**  
**Lieutenant General, USA**  
**President**

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR**

Colonel Graham D. Vernon, USA, is a Soviet foreign area specialist. Colonel Vernon wrote this monograph while serving as a Senior Research Fellow in the Research Directorate of the National Defense University. He received a BS degree from the United States Military Academy in 1953, a master's degree from the University of Indiana in 1967, and was a 1965 graduate of the Army Command and Staff College. Colonel Vernon attended the US Army Institute for Advanced Soviet and East European Studies in 1970. He was an Analyst in the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency from 1977-1978, and served as Defense Army Attache in Moscow, USSR from 1975-1977. Colonel Vernon also served in the Defense Intelligence Agency from 1971-1974 and as a Regimental Advisor for the Military Assistance Command in the Republic of Vietnam from 1970-1971.



## THE ISSUE

For more than 30 years the forces of East and West have faced one another in Central Europe. Though crises have occurred, war has not. Today, in a period of detente, SALT, and MBFR (and of growing conventional and nuclear forces on both sides of the border), the projection for the future is continued—if troubled—peace. Given current conditions and constraints, there is no crisis in sight which could warrant the risk of war in Central Europe. Nevertheless, it is the business of the military to prepare for war, however remote. With time the aforementioned conditions and constraints will change and, in addition, the possibility of an irrational war cannot be excluded.

Preparations for war are in large measure based on perceptions of enemy capabilities and intentions. History teaches that those who hold erroneous perceptions risk payment of a heavy price, and NATO may be sustaining that risk today.

→ The prevailing conviction among Western military and civilian leaders is that a Warsaw Pact attack against NATO would begin without the use of nuclear weapons and that the Pact would prefer the war remain conventional. A derivative of this thesis is that NATO will have the dubious luxury of opting if and when nuclear weapons should be used.<sup>1</sup> This view may be correct; there are sound reasons to believe that it is. There are also sound reasons to believe it is not. What is worrisome, however, is the near absolute conviction with which this view is held by the NATO leadership and the consequent denigration of the possibility that the Pact might exercise another alternative.

→ This paper will examine Soviet declaratory doctrine, force posture, and other considerations, and judge the validity of the current Western position on the issue. Those factors which would motivate the Soviets to shun the use of nuclear weapons will be examined first, followed by an examination of those factors which encourage first use of nuclear weapons by the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

Several markers should be put down at this point.

First, the paper addresses a conflict in Central Europe. The Soviet response to such a conflict would be heavily scenario dependent, and the number of scenarios for hostilities in the region is limited only by one's imagination. Possible variants in-



clude a Pact attempt to seize Berlin and a Pact attack limited to the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). This paper will examine, however, a scenario in which the Pact initiates a war with the goal of seizing the European peninsula with Warsaw Pact Armed Forces. Included as a part of the Pact's mission would be seizure of the French channel ports. The attack would include air and/or rocket attacks against the United Kingdom.

Second, although the paper addresses a Warsaw Pact attack against NATO, it must be stressed that given today's situation, the Pact would only make such an attempt under extreme conditions. The Warsaw Pact does not want a war in Central Europe, and would initiate the scenario described above only if it perceived no acceptable alternative was available.

Finally, this paper addresses a NATO-Pact conflict. Nevertheless, the most important role the forces on both sides of the border have served over the past 30 years, and which they continue to serve today, is a political one. This point must be kept in mind when discussing issues of force structure, strategy, and declaratory doctrine, along with the corollary that there may be contradictions between the political and war-fighting roles. For example, while NATO's position that it will resort to nuclear weapons rather than accept defeat is effective as a deterrent, it may not make sense militarily. Similarly, the Pact's assertion that limited use of nuclear weapons will almost certainly lead to uncontrolled escalation is useful in deterring NATO's first use of nuclear weapons, but may not reflect actual Pact thought.

#### **WHY CONVENTIONAL?**

##### **The Escalation Problem**

For the Soviets, a key determinant in their decision on the mode of attack will be their assessment of the consequent risk to the Soviet Union. If the Soviets believe their use of nuclear weapons in Central Europe will ultimately result in defeat or unacceptable losses, they presumably would avoid such use.

Specialists may disagree as to whether the Soviet Union accepts the principle of Mutual Assured Destruction (which postulates that in an unrestricted nuclear war both the United States and USSR would be destroyed), but there is no doubt they anticipate appalling losses.<sup>3</sup> Statements can be found, usually in military publications, that the Soviets would "win" such a

campaign.<sup>4</sup> However, the statements of "winning" together with those which address probable losses imply that to "win" is to survive. Nevertheless, the fairly extensive Soviet efforts toward civil defense suggest that the Soviets have some hopes of emerging from a world nuclear conflict with a modicum of governmental organization and productive processes.

It can be argued, rightly, that lesser gradations than world nuclear war may be possible, with variations ranging from "symbolic" use of a few small tactical weapons to massive, theater-wide strikes, all at a level lower than unrestricted use and all offering the possibility of less risk to the Soviet Union. If nuclear weapons are used, the best of all worlds for the Soviet Union would be a situation less than unrestricted nuclear war but one in which the Soviets were able to apply requisite nuclear force to Western Europe while holding damage to themselves to acceptable levels. This implies a war limited in terms of space and/or size of weapons.

The most discussed variant of such a war is one limited to the theater of Europe. Some Western analysts of Soviet military doctrine find this concept intriguing because it furnishes, in their view, a credible way station between the less credible options of worldwide nuclear war or a NATO-Pact conventional war. A theater nuclear war, these analysts suggest, offers a means for the Soviets and United States, their territories sacrosanct, to avoid suffering nuclear strikes. While this may be a comforting concept for the two superpowers, it is less so for Central Europe. It does not account for the possible reaction of the French and British, who may not be inclined to suffer strikes against their territory without retaliating against their source. This variant becomes still more improbable upon examining the current deployment, in the Soviet Union rather than Eastern Europe, of the bulk of Soviet theater nuclear forces, targeted against Western Europe, thus making the probability of a retaliatory strike against Soviet territory more likely.

Presumably, according to the theater nuclear variant, should France or the UK retaliate, the Soviet Union is expected to accept the consequent loss to her economic base, population, and nuclear force while allowing the United States and China to watch from the sidelines, undamaged, the balance of power vis-a-vis the Soviet Union shifting markedly in their favor.

Perhaps understandably, the Soviet reaction to such scenarios has been negative. They stress the probability of escalation, both in size of weapons and scope of territory. This risk, they write, exists in any limited conflict, but is particularly acute for a war in Central Europe. For example:

[The imperialists offer] in particular, with the aim of blackmailing enemies, a threat to use some portion of the American tactical nuclear weapons in local actions in Europe, thinking that use of "warning atomic shots" will not lead to global thermonuclear war. It is absolutely clear that such conclusions are predicated more on propaganda than military considerations.

A few pages later, the author writes:

In conditions where the entire world is entangled in a network of military alliances in which the United States and England have a share, an armed conflict on European territory would inevitably drag other nations of the world into a thermonuclear collision.<sup>5</sup>

More recently the Soviets referred to theater nuclear war in the following fashion:

Take for example, a theater nuclear war, which according to the plans of the Pentagon and NATO might be unleashed in Europe and assume (purely theoretically) that it doesn't expand into a world nuclear war (although practically this is out of the question).<sup>6</sup>

It is possible that this is deterrent rhetoric, based not on Soviet convictions, but rather a ploy to deter NATO first use by stressing the dreadful consequences. Probably not. Certainly their thoughts along those lines are reinforced when they read statements by leading US figures who also harbor doubts about limiting nuclear war. For example, former Deputy Secretary of Defense Gilpatric said:

As far as I am concerned I never believed in a so-called limited nuclear war. I simply cannot imagine how one can establish any limitations, once any sort of nuclear weapon is launched.



In the same vein, Henry Kissinger wrote:

... limited nuclear war will automatically become general because the losing side will continuously introduce new resources in order to restore the situation.

Lest there be any doubt that Soviet military planners are aware of these statements, the quotations were taken from the well-known Soviet book, *Military Strategy*, published by the Ministry of Defense, and required reading for Soviet officers.<sup>7</sup>

More recently Secretary of Defense Brown was cited in *Pravda*, stating that he felt that a limited strategic war was nearly impossible, that such a war would soon involve attack on cities and industrial centers.<sup>8</sup>

The probability is that the Soviets view nuclear war in Central Europe escalating to unrestricted use in the theater with a high probability of involving strikes by and against US-based strategic forces. This belief is a powerful deterrent against Soviet first use of nuclear weapons.

#### **The Damage Limitation Problem**

The second consideration which might cause the Soviets to avoid use of nuclear weapons is related to the first. Specifically, the risks nuclear war pose to the Soviet Union are posed in at least equal measure to smaller and more heavily populated and industrialized Western Europe. However, this area, seized relatively intact, would add considerably to the economic strength of the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> (The possibility of gaining this wealth could be a minor contributing factor in a Soviet decision to go to war.) To the extent that the Soviet Union believes a nonnuclear war would cause less damage to Western Europe than a nuclear war, and that it would be to the advantage of the Soviet Union to minimize damage, the Soviets would prefer the nonnuclear variant.

#### **Success Probability**

Nations do not normally initiate a war unless they believe they can win. Soviet decisionmakers must consider the relative probability of success of conventional and nuclear attack. Examining the likely outcome of a conventional attack through Soviet eyes introduces the paradox of the nuclear threshold. A great deal



has been written about NATO's nuclear threshold, the point at which NATO must resort to nuclear weapons rather than accept defeat by Pact conventional forces. The argument usually goes that the stronger NATO's conventional forces the higher NATO's nuclear threshold and the less likely nuclear war. (The statements by General Brown, Mr. Shearer, and Minister of Defense Leber, cited earlier, reflect this concept.) Insufficient attention, however, has been focused on the Warsaw Pact's view of this rationale. Logic would indicate that as NATO's nuclear threshold rises because of additional conventional strength, the Warsaw Pact's nuclear threshold lowers, because their conventional option becomes less viable. Ergo, advocating additional NATO conventional forces to reduce the probability of nuclear war could have precisely the opposite effect.

It is far more likely, however, that strengthening NATO's conventional forces will strengthen their deterrent value, thereby improving NATO's ability to accomplish their peacetime political mission of preserving the status quo in Europe.

We, unfortunately, are not privy to the thinking of the Soviet General Staff on the probability of success of a conventional campaign. Because of their emphasis on the probability of a war in Central Europe becoming nuclear, the Soviets rarely mention the outcome of a wholly conventional war in this area. It may be wrong to conclude that the generally low level of self-confidence in the West is matched by a generally high level of self-confidence in the East. (Military leaders, like coaches, are rarely satisfied that their resources suffice.) Nevertheless, and although there is no conclusive evidence, NATO leadership misgivings, the tenor of Soviet writings with their emphasis on the offensive, and the fact the Soviet military is generally a satisfied client in Soviet society, indicate that the Soviet General Staff may well have a fairly high level of confidence in their ability to prosecute a successful conventional war against NATO.

#### **Exercise Data**

A large-scale Warsaw Pact command post exercise (CPX) or field training exercise (FTX) is expensive in terms of material and time. Presumably, the Warsaw Pact uses these exercises to test realistic options and possible courses of action. Although data on Warsaw Pact conduct of these exercises is limited, in 1974 then

Secretary of Defense Schlesinger noted that "in the exercises the Soviets have indicated far greater interest in the notions of controlled nuclear war and nonnuclear war than has ever been reflected in their doctrine."<sup>10</sup> It is fair to conclude from this cryptic statement that the Pact has practiced conventional and graduated nuclear exercises "against" NATO.

Arguments can be made against over-eager acceptance of Soviet exercises as evidence indicative of Soviet war plans. We do not know what conclusions the Soviet General Staff draws from these exercises, i.e., do the tests of these contingencies suggest they work to the advantage or disadvantage of the Warsaw Pact? Further, given the emphasis the Soviets put on deception and surprise—and their knowledge of Western reconnaissance capabilities—it is not out of the question that these exercises are part of a deception plan.

In spite of these reservations, Schlesinger's statement suggests that the Pact may have a variety of contingencies available to Central Europe, that if provoked they will not necessarily automatically initiate war with a nuclear strike, nor spontaneously respond to NATO first use with a theater strike or worse, and that the selected option could be designed to fit varying political and military requirements. Presumably the more limited the Pact goals the less likely that they will introduce nuclear weapons. However, as noted earlier, this paper postulates relatively ambitious Pact goals—the seizure of Western Europe.

#### **The Preemption Option**

If the Soviets had the capability to preempt NATO first use of nuclear weapons, their problem would be simplified. They could begin with a conventional attack, thus initially avoiding the risks associated with nuclear war, and yet accrue the advantages of first use should it appear NATO was preparing to resort to nuclear weapons. The Soviets apparently do recognize such a scenario and make veiled references to preemption as a possible strategy.<sup>11</sup> The issue turns on the degree of confidence the Soviets have in their ability to execute this scenario. The higher their level of confidence that they could preempt, the greater their incentive to forego a nuclear opening and to adhere to a conventional attack.

Preemption would be less risky for the Soviets should NATO first use be limited to a very few warheads intended to serve as a symbolic "warning shot across the bow." Should this be the case, the Pact would suffer tolerable losses and still retain the capability to respond with a massive strike.

#### **NATO Release Procedures**

Although the Soviets do not openly discuss the subject, their assessment of NATO nuclear release procedures could impact on their use or nonuse of nuclear weapons. One need not be an alarmist to suspect that a decision to use nuclear weapons could be an agonizing one. Depending on the Soviet evaluation of this problem and their confidence in the ability of Pact conventional forces to move forward rapidly, they might decide that by the time the decision is made Pact forces will have advanced so far that NATO use of nuclear weapons would be ineffective, senseless, or both.

Such a judgment on the part of the Soviets would be highly conjectural and would carry with it heavy risks. Nonetheless, it is a line of reasoning which argues for a conventional opening.

In sum, there are cogent reasons to believe the Soviets would seek to avoid the use of nuclear weapons in Central Europe. The near certainty of destroying potential assets in Western Europe, exercise data suggesting that the Soviets will key their military actions to the political (and military) situation, hints that they consider preemption of NATO first use a probability, and possible NATO nuclear release problems—all argue against a nuclear start.



## WHY NUCLEAR?

Let us turn now to considerations which suggest the Soviets would opt, however grudgingly, to use nuclear weapons from the start. There are two trains of thought which might lead the Soviets in this direction. The first derives from an examination of Soviet declaratory doctrine, the second from NATO declaratory doctrine. In addition, time and force posture bear on the decision and will be examined.

### Soviet Declaratory Doctrine

There are three tenets of Soviet declaratory doctrine, which, taken together, encourage initial Soviet use of nuclear weapons. These are (1) the sooner-or-later thesis, (2) the dual capability issue, and (3) the surprise factor. These precepts are discussed in detail below.

*The Sooner-or-Later Thesis.* Khrushchev, at the 20th CPSU Congress in 1956, discarded the notion that war between communism and capitalism was inevitable.<sup>12</sup> The danger of such a war remained great, however, and the conflict, in its political and social essence, would be a world war and would "*be the decisive armed conflict of the two opposing world social systems.*" [Italics in text] Moreover, "From the point of the means of armed conflict a third world war will be first and foremost a nuclear war."<sup>13</sup> Europe is central to this concept. The Soviets have demonstrated their sensitivity to events in this area, witness their actions to insure friendly governments in Eastern Europe following World War II and their intervention in Hungary and Czechoslovakia to insure the continuity of their clients. For the Soviet Union "*Europe is the most important area in the world today.*" [Italics in text] It is in Europe that the two systems directly confront each other . . . "<sup>14</sup> Because of the critical importance of Europe, because of what is at stake, neither side is likely to give up its interests without resorting to nuclear weapons.<sup>15</sup> Thus, from the Soviet point of view, the probability is that a war in Central Europe will, sooner or later, turn nuclear.



*The Dual Capability Issue.* The Soviets consider the advent of nuclear weapons a watershed in the history of military development and emphasize the war-fighting rather than deterrent value of these weapons.

The use of these weapons has fundamentally altered the nature of combat, the operation, and the entire war as a whole. The possibility of quickly achieving not only an operational result directly but also a strategic one comprises the main distinguishing feature of a nuclear war.<sup>16</sup>

This view is reflected in articles on tactics and large unit operations in Soviet military journals, articles which usually assume a nuclear environment.

One major consequence of this revolutionary rather than evolutionary change is the substantive difference between the way the Soviets would fight a nuclear and a conventional war and the resultant difficulties and dangers of permitting an initial conventional phase, leaving to NATO the option of choosing when and how the rules should be changed. Such basic fundamentals as the main avenues of approach are different in conventional and nuclear warfare.<sup>17</sup> Further, the massing of troops necessary to achieve a breakthrough in conventional operations may entail taking unacceptable risks and result in defeat, should the enemy suddenly introduce nuclear weapons.<sup>18</sup> Thus the Soviets, by planning and posturing themselves for a conventional war, would not be unlike a football team which assumed a goal line defense on the 50-yard line—admirable strategy if the opposing team runs, but somewhat dubious should the opponent decide to pass.

*The Surprise Factor.* Another major revision brought about by the introduction of nuclear weapons is the increase in the importance of surprise. Prior to the advent of nuclear weapons, and indeed until the Soviets had accumulated a sizeable quantity of these weapons, they discounted the importance of surprise as a factor determining ultimate victory. Now, according to Soviet doctrine, a surprise nuclear attack at the start of a war can be the decisive factor in determining the outcome.<sup>19</sup>

### **Soviet Declaratory Doctrine—Summing Up**

Thus the Soviets believe that war in Central Europe will eventually be nuclear; they believe it will be a war for survival; they believe they subject themselves to serious complications and risks by posturing themselves for a conventional war; and they believe the side which achieves surprise with first use of nuclear weapons accrues decisive advantage. Therefore, it is not incandescently clear why they would initiate a conventional war in Europe against the "imperialists," remain in a conventional posture until NATO decides it must use nuclear weapons, and only then employ their own nuclear weapons in an attempt to preempt NATO first use.

Again, one can argue that Soviet declaratory doctrine is only rhetoric designed to deter NATO first use by stressing the consequences, and this may be so. One can also point out, correctly, that there are Soviet statements that indicate a war in Central Europe conceivably could remain conventional and that, in any case, use of nuclear weapons must be subordinate to political goals.<sup>20</sup> But in attempting to sustain this line of reasoning, as NATO apparently does, one must be aware of the risks of synthetic optimism and of the preponderance of evidence which suggests different conclusions.

### **NATO Declaratory Doctrine—Nukes Before Dishonor**

NATO doctrine includes the concept that rather than accept defeat NATO will employ nuclear weapons. For the Soviets to start a conventional war in the face of this doctrine requires their acceptance of one of several hypotheses. The first is that the Warsaw Pact have reasonable confidence that it can defeat NATO conventionally since, as mentioned earlier, it is unlikely the Soviets would start a war they do not think they can win. Second, in spite of the Soviet declaratory doctrine discussed earlier, they would have to believe they could survive NATO's first use of nuclear weapons and still win or that they could preempt NATO's first use, or that NATO was bluffing and would accept defeat rather than introduce nuclear weapons.

Thus the two Central European scenarios which do not result in the use of nuclear weapons require that (1) NATO halt a conventional Pact attack and that the Pact accept the resultant stalemate, or (2) that NATO accept defeat rather than introduce

nuclear weapons. Both of these scenarios have marginal credibility, and carry with them serious risks for the Soviets, coupled with the demand that the Soviets forego the advantages they see in achieving surprise first use.

### **Soviet Theater Nuclear Strike Forces**

Earlier, when discussing factors which might dissuade the Soviets from introducing nuclear weapons, their desire to limit destruction in Western Europe was cited. This argument presumes that if nuclear weapons were used, massive damage would result and that Western Europe would, at the end, resemble a moonscape. This may have been the case when large Soviet warheads were mandated by inaccurate delivery systems, but this situation no longer obtains. Today's Soviet weapons are more sophisticated and there is increasing evidence that they are matching these weapons to damage limitation policies.

The Soviets write that massive indiscriminate destruction through their use of nuclear weapons is not necessary and indeed may work against them. They argue that in conditions of nuclear war, supplies from their own bases might be disrupted and that they would be forced to depend on available local resources. They also argue that preservation of enemy economic resources has long-term advantages for the winning side.<sup>21</sup> It is not likely, however, that the Soviets would adhere to this damage-limiting strategy if the price paid were a greater risk of defeat. This price, they suggest, would not be paid. Selective targeting of critical industries can be *more* effective than massive destruction on a relatively indiscriminate basis.<sup>22</sup>

Doctrinal writing means little, however, unless military forces have the wherewithal to implement it. In this instance, wherewithal may be translated as nuclear weapons of adequate accuracy and variety coupled with nonnuclear weapons suitable for use in a nuclear environment. Soviet forces qualify on both counts.

*Aircraft.* The USSR is deploying, in the forward area, sophisticated new aircraft capable of executing low-level nuclear attacks against all NATO targets in Western Europe. In addition, the Soviets could employ the USSR-based BACKFIRE, which is purportedly designed for such peripheral missions.



*IRBM/MRBM.* The mobile, solid-fueled SS-20 is replacing (or supplementing) the SS-4 and SS-5 IRBM's. There are reports that this weapon is or soon will be deployed in the western part of the country. More accurate, solid-fueled, mobile, MIRVed, the SS-20 represents a revolutionary improvement over its predecessors. It is thought to have a rapid reload and instant- or multiple-retargeting capability. The SS-20 will enable the Pact to strike virtually all NATO airbases; weapons storage sites; command, communications, and control facilities; and fixed missiles with little warning.

*Tactical Rockets and Missiles.* There are indications that the Soviets are beginning to replace their SCUD's and FROG's with new weapons. Presumably these will offer greater range, reliability, and accuracy.<sup>23</sup>

*Artillery.* In a statement the 1st of March 1978, General Alexander Haig, Commander in Chief, Allied Forces Europe, stated that the Soviets had developed nuclear artillery but that it had not yet been deployed near NATO front lines.<sup>24</sup>

Based on the above, the Warsaw Pact has on hand new generations of more accurate weapons, with consequently lesser yield requirements. They have the capability to fight a theater nuclear war using selective nuclear strikes to accomplish military/political goals while limiting collateral damage. They have no need to create a wasteland of Western Europe. Indeed, they write that this would be inimical to their interests.

### **The Time Factor**

Another consideration which encourages initial Soviet use of nuclear weapons is time. The premise here is that a short war favors the Warsaw Pact and a long war NATO, and that a nuclear war will probably be shorter than a conventional war. Factors which are time dependent include:

*The Economic Base.* Until the advent of nuclear weapons, Communist theory postulated that the economic base, the productive process, was a major force in determining the outcome of a war. Nuclear weapons have caused this thesis to be somewhat modified. Now,

... under conditions of employment of nuclear weapons the course and outcome of war are determined in



the final account by the economy of the society and method of production, but not by what the economy will provide for in wartime, but primarily by what it provides and is capable of providing in peacetime.<sup>25</sup>

Simply put, in a nuclear war, what you see is what you get; there will not be time to transit to war production as has been the case in past wars. According to this dogma, the Pact, with a lesser economic base and generally larger stocks of weapons on hand than NATO, would favor the shorter length of the nuclear war, thereby denying the West the opportunity to gear up their productive base.

*Warsaw Pact Reliability.* The length of the war will also bear on the reliability of the non-Soviet members of the Pact. The Soviets are well aware that the loyalty of the people of these countries is thin, and that a prolonged war could create serious problems, particularly given the location of these countries astride the logistic lines of Soviet forces. A short offensive war would tend to secure the "loyalty" of these countries and of their military forces.

*Mobilization Rates.* Time is also a factor in view of NATO and Warsaw Pact mobilizing rates. Warsaw Pact/NATO force ratios during and following mobilization are heavily scenario dependent. (How long after the Pact starts mobilization does NATO detect it? When is the decision made for NATO to start mobilization? What kind of combat effectiveness ratios are used? etc.) Specialists generally agree, however, that the Pact achieves its highest force ratios vis-a-vis NATO shortly after the start of mobilization (10-20 days) but thereafter this gap is steadily narrowed by NATO mobilization.<sup>26</sup> To the extent that force ratios benefit the Pact, it is to their advantage to win the war quickly, before NATO can bring to bear maximum strength.

It would seem that a shorter war favors the Pact, and that time-related considerations—to the extent they play a role in Pact decisionmaking—argue for a nuclear opening.

*The China Factor.* As nature abhors a vacuum, military strategists abhor two-front wars. The Soviets and Chinese share a long border, ideological disagreements, and territorial differences. The territorial differences are real enough to have resulted in armed clashes and Soviet concerns are deep enough to have

caused fairly massive—about 45 divisions plus support forces—deployments in the area. Given this situation, the Soviets would prefer the shorter war, hopefully finished before the Chinese have an opportunity to make movements toward satisfying their irredentist claims.

#### **NATO Force Posture**

It was noted earlier that the Soviets write that nuclear weapons multiply the advantages gained by achieving surprise, even to the point that the first few hours can determine the outcome of a war. Although this is written as a general principle, an examination of NATO force posture suggests it may be particularly applicable in Central Europe.

NATO is poorly postured for a nuclear war. There are limited rail and road networks between peacetime and wartime positions and relatively few airfields. The majority of critical command, control, and communications centers are soft, reserves of ammunition are small and concentrated at a few, largely unprotected depots, and the bulk of NATO's roughly 7,000 tactical nuclear warheads are concentrated in a relatively small number of easily identifiable storage sites. Further, some of the very weapons whose range and payload offer the greatest threat to the Soviet Union—aircraft and the relatively immobile Pershing missiles—are most vulnerable to nuclear strikes.<sup>27</sup> NATO's nuclear submarines are, of course, relatively invulnerable to such strikes.

In short, NATO's peacetime posture is extraordinarily vulnerable to a "bolt from the blue" theater-wide nuclear strike. Under current conditions, such an attack is most unlikely. A more feasible scenario is an attack during a period of tension when NATO would presumably have taken some steps to reduce vulnerabilities. But many of NATO's problems are not amenable to a quick fix, and first use of nuclear weapons offers the Pact substantial advantages, including perhaps, the opportunity to "decide the course of the war in the first few hours." Unfortunately, NATO's vulnerabilities not only work to the advantage of the Pact during the initial stages of a theater nuclear war, but through to its conclusion.

Most of NATO's weaknesses do not find their echo in the Warsaw Pact. Many of the older Pact high-performance aircraft are capable of operating from dirt strips, thereby gaining greater

protection and flexibility, and a large number of their command, communications, and control facilities are in hard sites. The Warsaw Pact is better postured than NATO to win a theater nuclear war, and therefore they are better postured to deter it—or to start it.

### **CONCLUSION**

From the point of view of the Soviet decisionmaker, the nuclear or nonnuclear choice offers no easy solution. Whether or not nuclear weapons are used from the outset, a war in Central Europe poses mammoth risks to the Soviet Union. From this it is fair to conclude that, given the current balance of forces, the Soviet Union will not undertake a war against NATO unless the leadership perceives that crucial national interests are at stake. If one accepts this thesis, it is difficult to reconcile, in the same chain of logic, from the *Soviet* point of view, the possible scenarios on which the NATO defense is predicated. Would the Soviets attack conventionally, leaving to NATO the decision of whether, when, where, and on what scale to use nuclear weapons, but hoping to preempt this use? Considering the vital importance of the issue that warranted the start of the war, would a stalemate be acceptable to either side? If NATO's assumption that the Pact will not use nuclear weapons initially is correct, the answer to one of these questions must be yes. Yet the weight of available evidence indicates the answer to both is no.

All of the pieces of the puzzle do not fit, however, and there are nagging doubts. The greatest of these is prompted by the unquestionable acceptance by the Soviet leadership of the price they would pay, even in a "victorious" nuclear war. Nevertheless, given the current balance of forces and a situation in which the military objectives issued to the Warsaw Pact required penetration to the English channel, it is probable they would choose to open the war with a theater-wide nuclear strike by Soviet forces. The overwhelming advantages which stem from a massive first strike, NATO declaratory doctrine which posits use of nuclear weapons rather than acceptance of conventional defeat, NATO force posture, and the time factor are persuasive arguments for this course of action and outweigh the argument of the appalling losses which would result on both sides.

Looking to the future, the stance the Soviets adopt on this issue will be based on the balance of forces in Central Europe and



the perceived US commitment to the area, and played against the backdrop of the strategic balance between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Those relationships are in flux. Almost certainly a Soviet willingness to limit themselves to conventional weapons in Europe is dependent upon their conviction that these weapons will suffice and that NATO will not resort to nuclear weapons to avoid defeat. Conversely, a Soviet judgment that the probability of success of their conventional forces is marginal or less, or that NATO would use their nuclear weapons if necessary, would prompt the Soviets either to initially resort to nuclear weapons, to moderate their goals, or to forego armed conflict.

On the strategic level, a Soviet perception that they have a first-strike capability against the United States (and against France and the United Kingdom), or that the US commitment to Europe was soft, would make their decision easier. They could then use nuclear weapons with less concern about consequent damages or use only conventional weapons with fewer worries about a NATO decision to resort to nuclear weapons.

However, given the current situation, Soviet use of nuclear weapons from the start of a war in Central Europe is the most likely of several unattractive options.

#### **ENDNOTES**

1. For example:

Early combat capability [of NATO], especially conventional force capability, is a means of keeping the nuclear threshold high.

And further on:

An evident capability [by NATO] for selective employment of nuclear weapons against armored thrusts contributes to theater deterrence and provides an intermediate option between conventional warfare and a general nuclear war.

US, Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *United States Military Posture for FY 1979*, Statement by General George S. Brown, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the Congress, prepared 20 January 1978, pp. 12, 15.

Richard Shearer, Director of Nuclear Planning for NATO, echoes this thought in his article, "Nuclear Weapons and the Defense of Europe," *NATO Review*, December 1975, p. 14:

... the point here is that the more capable the conventional forces, the better the odds that the nuclear force will not be required, or at least there will be more time for Alliance consultation.

Further, George Leber, Minister of Defense of the FRG, wrote in an article entitled "A General Policy Overview," *NATO's Fifteen Nations*, August/September 1977, p. 57:

In this situation [nuclear parity as it now exists] the credibility of NATO strategy and the credibility of the Alliance as a whole, depends on whether our conventional defense capabilities are strong enough so as not to require nuclear weapons to fill the gap.

This concept is also accepted by the distinguished civilian specialist on Soviet military affairs, British writer John Erickson, who wrote, "But let us be clear here: The Soviet Command understands that conventional operations in the initial phase of any European campaign are both feasible and desirable, . . ." "Soviet Military Capabilities," *Current History*, October 1975, p. 128.

2. This paper will not address chemical weapons. However, the Soviets consider that both nuclear and chemical weapons are weapons of mass destruction. Further, they suggest that chemical weapons will be used should nuclear weapons be introduced. In the open press they do not write of the use of chemical weapons without nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, logic suggests that this option might be very attractive to them. NATO has an almost total inability to respond in kind coupled with a nearly equal inability to defend itself. Chemical weapons cause almost no structural damage and their use could be portrayed as "more humane" than nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, due to the absence of Soviet views in this area, conjecture along this line tends to be speculative.

3. Brezhnev, for example, in the 8 June 1969 issue of *Pravda* wrote:

One of the most serious dangers that imperialism poses to people of the whole world is the threat of a new world war . . . imperialist powers are building up

stockpiles of nuclear weapons of mass destruction . . .  
a threat to the lives of millions of people and to the  
existence of entire peoples.

See L. I. Brezhnev, "Za Skreplenie Splochnosti Kommunistov Za Novyi Pobeda V Antiimperialisticheskoi Voine" [For Strengthening of Solidarity of Communists, for New Victory in the Anti-Imperialistic War], *Pravda*, June 8, 1969, p. 1.

Seven years later Brezhnev's views apparently had not changed: "Things have reached the point where if all the present stockpiles of weapons were employed, mankind might be wholly destroyed." Speech at Soviet-Romanian Friendship rally in Bucharest, November 24, 1976. Cited in *FBIS Daily Report—Soviet Union*, November 24, 1976, p. D5.

4. The author writes:

Such a process [the strengthening of socialism and weakening of capitalism as a result of guerrilla wars and the rebuffs of imperialists' attempts to expand through wars] will appear in full measure in a future world war, if one is unleashed by the imperialists. In that war socialism will win.

Further on, the author continues:

Bourgeois ideologists also distort the question of the possible results of a thermonuclear war. They assert that in a modern war there will be neither victories nor victors. Marxism-Leninism refutes these inventions and proves that in spite of the colossal sacrifices and losses, which all the peoples of the world will suffer, the war will end with the destruction of imperialism.

General-Major N. Ia Sushko and Colonel S. A. Tyuskkevicha, ed. *Marksizm-Leninizm o Voine u Armii* [Marxism-Leninism on War and Army] (Moscow: Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 1965), pp. 128, 366. Available in English, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, Stock Number 0870-00338.

5. A. E. Efremov, *Europa i Iadernoe Oruzhie* [Europe and Nuclear Weapons], (Moscow: International Relations Publishing House, 1972), pp. 368, 370.

6. R. Simonian, "O Riske Protivostoianii" [Of the Risk of Confrontation], *Pravda*, June 14, 1977, p. 5.



7. V. D. Sokolovsky, *Voennaia Strategiia* [Military Strategy], 3d ed. (Moscow: Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 1968), pp. 88-89.
8. Simonian, "O Riske Protivostoianiiia" [Of the Risk of Confrontation], *Pravda*, June 14, 1977, p. 5.
9. The combined gross national product (GNP) of NATO countries in Central Europe (Belgium, Denmark, France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Portugal) in 1975 was \$1,029.4 billion. That of the Warsaw Pact, excluding the Soviet Union, was \$291.0 billion. If the combined GNP's of Austria, Switzerland, and Spain (\$179.6 billion), which probably should be included should the Soviets win, were added, the prize becomes even greater. The GNP of the Soviet Union in 1975 was \$870.00 billion.
10. US, Congress, Senate, Subcommittee on US Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad and the Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Law and Organization, *Hearings, US Nuclear Weapons in Europe and US-USSR Strategic Doctrine and Policies*, 93rd Cong., 2d sess., March 7, 14 and April 4, 1974, p. 183.
11. A. A. Grechko, *Na Strazhe Mirai: Stroitel'stva Kommunizma* [On Guard Over Peace and the Building of Communism] (Moscow: Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 1971), p. 64.
12. By 1974 Brezhnev not only allowed that war was not inevitable, but suggested that it was the capitalists who had originated the theory and who were subsequently forced to recognize reality:

Finally, the capitalist world had to face the truth.  
It had to recognize the impossibility of solving militarily  
the historical differences between capitalism and socialism.
- Pravda*, January 31, 1974, p. 2.
13. Sokolovsky, *Voennaia Strategiia*, pp. 253-254.
14. I. Orlik and V. Raymerov, "European Security and Relations Between the Two Systems," *International Affairs* 5 (1967): 3.
15. Soviet views on the probability of escalation of war in Central Europe were earlier cited in footnote number 5.
16. Colonel General N. A. Lomov, *Nauchno-Tekhnicheskii Progress i Revoliutsiia v Voennom Dele* [Scientific Technical

Progress and the Revolution in Military Affairs] (Moscow: Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 1973), p. 5.

17. For example:

In connection with the introduction into armaments of nuclear missile weapons, the tactics of the services of the Armed Forces and the branches of arms fundamentally changed, and in this regard the relationship of tactics to "operational-level" strategy also changed. At present the scales and methods of conducting battle are different. Many questions of preparing for and conducting battle have been solved in a new manner, including the choice of the direction of the main blow and the concentration of forces and resources. Greater significance has been given to the factors of time and surprise, the maneuvering of forces and means, the continuity of combat operations and the all-around support of troops.

Ibid., p. 149.

18. The author writes:

It has already become impossible to maintain that the concentration of forces and means on the decisive axis, i.e., achievement of the necessary quality through quantity, regularly will lead to success. A large concentration of troops will most often create a lucrative target for the enemy and may soon lead to failure.

V. E. Ye Savkin, *Osnovniye Printsipy Operativnogo Iskusstva: Taktiki* [Basic Principles of Operational Art and Tactics] (Moscow: Military Publishing House, 1972), p. 225. Also available in English, translated by the U.S. Air Force, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, Stock No. 0870-00340.

General Goodpaster aptly expressed the problem faced by the Soviets:

This presents a dilemma to them. From our standpoint, it is a dilemma that has considerable value. That is, if they are under a threat of weapons of this kind, it denies them the ability freely to mass without consideration of what the consequences would be. If they were to mass in order to achieve the kind of local

superiority conventionally that would allow them to rupture our position or, as you say, to resort to other means to try to overlap it, then if they were to try that kind of massing, they would become extremely vulnerable to these weapons. They are inhibited against that kind of massing.

This, in itself, then, becomes an assistance to us, a great assistance in terms of the conventional posture on their side that we have to deal with.

I have to say that in my best judgment, and this is a matter to which I assure you I give the very deepest consideration, the presence of those weapons, both as a deterrent and in terms of potential warfighting use to which they could be put, has a very beneficial effect from our side in our objectives of deterrence and the defense pattern that we are able to follow.

US, Congress, Senate, Subcommittee on Military Applications of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, *Hearings, the Consideration of Military Application of Nuclear Technology*, Part 2, 93d Cong., 1st sess., May 22 and June 29, 1973. p. 62.

As an aside, it is interesting that while General Goodpaster looked upon this as a matter that he gave "the very deepest consideration," nowhere does he discuss what the Soviet reaction to this dilemma might be nor was he asked. Reading the transcript, one gains the impression that he and his interlocutors assumed that the Soviets would docilely accept the dilemma posed by General Goodpaster.

19. U. Ye. Savkin makes this point clearly, writing:

With the mass introduction of nuclear missiles into the armed forces of imperialist states, Soviet military science arrived at the conclusion that war can be begun by available groupings of troops, and not by previously mobilized armed forces, and that the beginning of a war can have a decisive effect on the outcome.

Further on he writes:

Victory in war will be formed not so much from the use of particular successes, but as a result of the



effective application of a state's maximum power at the very beginning of a conflict.

Savkin, *Osnovniye Printsipy Operativnogo Iskusstva: Taktiki*, pp. 88-90. See also, Lomov, *Nauchno-Tekhnicheskii Progress i Revoliutsiya v Voennom Dele*, p. 139.

Under present-day conditions [nuclear], from the very outset of a war, the most important strategic tasks can be carried out and the basic strategic goals of the war achieved. The character and content of the subsequent actions of the armed forces will be determined by this.

Also, Sokolovsky, in *Voennaia Strategiya*, p. 255, writes: "Since modern means of combat makes it possible to achieve exceptionally great strategic results in a short time, the initial period of a war will have decisive significance for the outcome of the entire war."

20. The author writes:

For everyone, and this includes local war theoreticians of the imperialists, it is clear that the probability of a local war becoming a general nuclear war if the nuclear powers are involved is *very great* and *in some cases inevitable*. (Emphasis added.)

N. Lominov, "Vlianie Sovetskoi Voennoi Doktrin Na Razvitiia Voennovo Iskusstva" [The Influence of Soviet Military Doctrine on the Development of Military Science], *Kommunist Vooruzhenykh Sil*, November 1965, p. 16. An earlier statement by Marshal P. A. Rotmistov criticized a NATO proposal for a belt of atomic land mines along the German border, saying that such a tactic would exclude any chance of the hostilities remaining nonnuclear, implying that without the belt nuclear weapons might not be introduced. Marshal P. A. Rotmistov, "Opasnye Plany Bonskykh Militaristov" [Dangerous Plans of the Bonn Militarists], *Kraznaia Zvezda*, December 29, 1968, p. 4. More recently, Marshal A. A. Grechko, then Minister of Defense, USSR, opened the door, slightly, to the possibility of conventional war, perhaps in Europe: "Depending on their scale, modern wars may be local, limited to the participation of two or several countries, or worldwide between the two opposing systems." A. A. Grechko, *Vooruzhennye Sily Sovetskovo Gosudarstva*

[Armed Forces of the Soviet State] (Moscow: Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 1975), p. 348.

Concerning the relationship of weapons and political goals see, for example, Sushko and Tyuskkevicha, *Marksizm-Leninizm o Voine i Armii*, p. 367:

In a nuclear world war, if the imperialists unleash one, the significance of politics is even greater. It will play an enormous role during the development of strategic and operational plans, in the management of military plans.

21. For a thorough discussion of the subject, see "Soviet Nuclear Strategy in Europe: A Selective Targeting Doctrine," by Joseph D. Douglass, Jr., in the Fall 1977 issue of *Strategic Review*, published by the United States Strategic Institute.

22. The tendency for some Western specialists has been to equate Soviet doctrinal writings of "massive use" with indiscriminate use. They may be right, but probably are not. For example, Colonel M. Shirokov wrote in "Military Geography at the Present State," *Voyennaia Mysl* No. 11, 1966, FPD 0730/67, July 27, 1967, p. 60:

For this purpose [acquiring local resources in theaters of military operation] it is very important to determine which targets and enemy regions should be left intact or rapidly reconstructed and used in the interests of strengthening the economic potential of our own country and for supplying the troops.

In an equally practical military vein, the Soviets, perhaps as a result of studying the effect of Anglo/American bombing efforts against Germany in WW II, or as a result of reading the book by Albert Speer, Germany's wartime Minister of Munition and Armaments Production, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970), pp. 285, 347, are aware that it is not necessary to obliterate a country's industrial base in order to achieve desired objectives. In the same article cited above (p. 59) Skirokov writes:

The objective is not to turn the large economic and industrial regions into a heap of ruins (although great destruction, apparently, is unavoidable), but to deliver strikes which will destroy strategic combat

means; paralyze enemy military production, making it incapable of satisfying the priority needs of the front and rear areas and sharply reduce the enemy capability to conduct strikes.

As noted previously, Soviet capability to conduct selective strikes has been improved since Colonel Shirokov wrote the above. The same general line was expressed by Lt. Gen. G. Semenov and Maj. Gen. V. Prokhorov, "Scientific Technical Progress on Some Questions of Strategy," *Voyennaya Mysl* No. 2, 1969, FPD 0060/69, June 18, 1969, p. 23:

Some of these weapons are capable of doing considerable damage to a continent, others only to individual states. This would retard the social progress of their peoples for a long time. Finally, still others lead to defeat of the enemy's armed forces without doing essential injury to the economy or populace of states whose aggressive rulers unleashed the war. Only political leadership can determine the scale and consistency of bringing to bear the most powerful means of destruction, in accordance with the interests of all mankind as a whole, the interests of the Communist movement, and the national interests of Soviet citizens.

The purpose of citing these statements is not to gild the horrors of a theater nuclear war, or to suggest it would be much like a conventional war, only perhaps a little noisier, for this is certainly not the case. Rather it is to point out that there are real advantages which accrue to matching nuclear use to political/military objectives and that the Soviets accept and propound this line of thought.

23. The information cited can be found in:

(a) Statement by General William Evans, Commanding General Allied Air Forces Central Europe, quoted by James Foley, "NATO Air Forces Reported Lagging Behind Those of Warsaw Pact Units," *Philadelphia Enquirer*, 25 January 1978, sec. E, p. 3E.

(b) *Defense and Foreign Affairs Daily*, 24 January 1978, p. 1.

(c) Justin Galen, "Tactical Nuclear Balance Part One: Recent Force Trends and Improvements," *Armed Forces Journal*, December 1977, pp. 29-34.



(d) "Soviet Aerospace Almanac," *Air Force Magazine*, March 1977.

(e) Benjamin F. Schemmer, "Soviet Build-Up on Central Front Poses New Threat to NATO," *Armed Forces Journal*, December 1966, pp. 30-33.

24. George C. Wilson, "Haig: Neutron Weapon Cuts Risks," *Washington Post*, March 22, 1978, p. 14.

25. Savkin, *Osnovniye Printsipy Operativnogo Iskusstvo i Taktiki*, pp. 86-87.

26. For a detailed study of NATO/Warsaw Pact mobilization see Robert Lucas Fischer, "Defending the Central Front: The Balance of Forces," *Adelphi Papers*, Number 127 (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1976).

27. For a more detailed discussion of NATO vulnerabilities, see Jeffrey Record, "Theater Nuclear Weapons: Begging the Soviet Union to Pre-empt," *Survival*, September/October 1977, pp. 208-211. Also Justin Galen, "Tactical Nuclear Balance Part Two: The NATO/Warsaw Pact Imbalance," *Armed Forces Journal*, January 1978, p. 20.

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